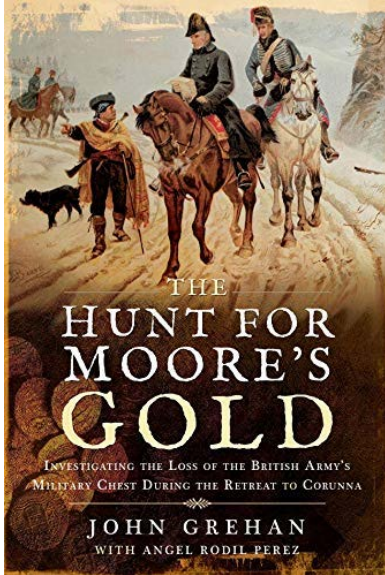


The Napoleon Series Reviews

Grehan, John. *The Hunt for Moore's Gold: Investigating the Loss of the British Army's Military Chest during the Retreat to Corunna*. Barnsley (UK): Frontline, 2019. 320 pages. ISBN# 1526730537. Hardcover. £25 / \$50



During the winter of 1808 – 1809, the British Army under Sir John Moore found itself in northern Spain with tens of thousands of French troops, commanded by Napoleon himself, bearing down on them. Knowing he was badly outnumbered, General Moore decided to retreat through some of the most rugged terrain in Spain to the port of Corunna, where he hoped the Royal Navy would be waiting there to evacuate them to safety. This retreat, over mountainous terrain, was along snow covered roads in freezing weather. It was possibly the most harrowing retreat in the history of the British Army. Thousands of men, women, and children died from exhaustion, hunger, and the extreme cold. While thousands more would suffer the loss of limbs, fingers, toes, etc. due to frostbite.

Over the past two hundred years there have been many books about the retreat. Some are histories, while others are first person accounts. One of the events that was often written about was the jettison of the expedition's money down the side of a mountain instead of allowing the pursuing French to capture it. Since it happened, many legends have grown about the money, yet how much truth is there in these tales? In the introduction of *The Hunt for Moore's Gold*, John Grehan writes

“Anyone who has read the history of Sir John Moore's retreat to Corunna will know of the story of the army's military chest being thrown into a deep ravine rather than allowing it to fall into the hands of the enemy. But just how true is this tale and exactly how much treasure was lost? How much of it was seized by the passing troops and was any recovered by the local Spanish peasants when the snow thawed and coins were exposed? Perhaps more importantly is there any of that treasure still sitting at the bottom of the ravine?”

“After decades of wondering what had happened to the military chest I had to accept that there was only one way to find out – by looking for myself. Thus began this quest to discover, once and for all, what happened to Moore's gold.”¹

Although *The Hunt for Moore's Gold* is the story of John Grehan's search for this fabled treasure, it is much more. The first part covers the retreat as seen through the eyes of the participants. . . not just senior and junior officers, but also the enlisted ranks, and civilians. A quick look at the bibliography shows 60+ primary sources, many of which are

¹ Pages xi - xii

compilations of multiple diaries and journals. There are, of course, the standard sources that other books have used, but the author also includes many that I was not familiar with. While most books about the retreat focuses only on British sources, *The Hunt for Moore's Gold* also tells the story from the French perspective.

Since the purpose of *The Hunt for Moore's Gold* is to chronicle the author's search for the missing gold, he spends considerable time on the events surrounding the decision to get rid of the gold, and where and when it happened. As I pointed out previously, many primary sources mention it, but as Mr. Grehan documents, only a handful witnessed it. . . and they did not always agree with each other. Even one of the most basic part of the story is open to question. . . how much gold was there?

Once the story of the retreat is completed, the author then moves on to the meat of the story. . . the actual search for the gold! It sounds like it should be simple, however, one of the first things that had to be done was reconciling all the accounts to determine where the most likely place where the gold was dumped. Not the easiest thing to do, since the eyewitnesses were cold, hungry, exhausted, and were only an hour or so ahead of the French cavalry. Combined with not having an accurate map or a local guide who could tell them the name of nearby villages or if they did know the name of the village, how to spell it, the treasure hunters were left with trying to match the 200 year description of the terrain to what is there now. Not the easiest feat since there is even some question about what road they took.

Once he came up with the most likely spot, Mr. Grehan takes the reader on his search: from his travels to Spain, to his dealings with the local officials, to his climbing up and down steep slopes to the use of a metal detector. Of course telling you what he found and where he found it would ruin the story. You will just have to buy the book.

In addition to being an outstanding story of both the retreat to Corunna and the author's search for gold, *The Hunt for Moore's Gold* has a hidden gem in it. Most books that come out today, have only eight pages of color images. This book is the exception. It has sixteen pages of color photographs! Many are of the landscape that the retreating troops walked over. They include:

- The place on the River Elsa where French General Lefèbvre-Desnôettes was captured.
- Sahagun cite of a cavalry fight.
- The cities of Astorga and Bemibre, which are featured so prominently in many of the primary sources
- The rugged mountains of the region
- The bridge over the Rio Cruzul where the British Reserve held back the French for an hour
- 13 images of the area where the military chest was disposed of
- The old parts of Corunna that have not changed all that much in 200 years.

The Hunt for Moore's Gold is a fascinating read about a modern day treasure hunt. It will hold the interest of both those interested in Napoleonic history and the many that enjoy a well-told story of a search for lost treasure. Highly recommended.

Reviewed by [Robert Burnham](#)

Placed on the Napoleon Series: May 2019